

THE SCOTCH-IRISH COME TO EGYPT

John I. Wright
Carbondale, IL 62901

(The following article was written and published in 1946 in the Journal of the Southern Illinois Historical Society, Vol. III. No. 1. Mr. WRIGHT, along with John W. ALLEN and others founded the Southern Illinois Historical Society which was active in the 1940's. Mr. WRIGHT, who is now 90 years old, lives with his wife Helen in Carbondale. He taught history at Southern Illinois University for 38 years. His ancestors were among the Scotch-Irish who came to Egypt and this prompted him to write this article).

The region known as Southern Illinois, or Little Egypt, has an unusually rich historical heritage. It is in point of settlement the oldest section of the State. Until near the middle of the nineteenth century, it dominated both political and economic life in Illinois. State and Territorial politics centered in Kaskaskia and Vandalia, our early Territorial and State capital cities; and the story of pioneer settlement had for its setting the hills, rivers and woodlands of Southern Illinois.

Due in part to its favorable location at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and in part to its climate and other environmental features

Southern Illinois has for many centuries been a favorite spot for human occupation. We find here evidences of pre-historic people whom we, for lack of a better name, call Mound Builders. The American Indians also lived here in relatively large numbers, but with the exception of a few Indian names and traditions they contributed little to the cultural development of the area. The French Settlers left considerably more with us, but even they, considering the length of time they were here, made remarkably small contributions to our political, economic and cultural life. English occupation following the French and Indian War added nothing to the area of permanent nature. During the American Revolution, George Rogers CLARK, sent here by the state of Virginia, easily dispossessed the British and the Illinois country became a possession of the Old Dominion. In 1784 Virginia, the Illinois country to the United States Government, and until 1790, when the Ordinance of 1787 became effective, governmental functions were left to the French and a few American inhabitants.

Virginia made a dismal failure in her attempt to govern the Illinois country or the county of Virginia as it was called; but on the other hand, her influence in the region was great because of the large and highly important groups of settlers and leaders that later came here from the Old Dominion. Scotch-Irish and German pioneers who came by way of Virginia brought with them social and political attitudes which characterized both our social and political institutions.

To fully appreciate the significance of the Scotch-Irish element in our pioneer history, it is necessary to trace their immigration from their homes in Scotland to the backwoods homes here in Southern Illinois. In 1611, James I of England who was also James VI of Scotland promoted a settlement of Scots in Ulster Ireland. In promoting this settlement, the Crown had a twofold purpose: In the first place, like the Jamestown settlement in America, it was a commercial experiment; in the second place, it was intended to offset influence of Catholicism in Ireland. The commercial experiment was highly successful, and soon the English mercantile interests were demanding protection against Irish competition. Parliament passed a bill in 1699 prohibiting exportation of Irish woolen goods, and the stage was set for the eighteenth century Scotch-Irish immigration to America. On the other hand, the Presbyterians in Ulster proved to be equally as disturbing to the English Crown, as the Southern Catholics, and this led to the first conflict between these people and the established Church of England.¹ Strangely enough their second conflict with the Anglicanism occurred in the back country of Virginia. This struggle between the Presbyterian Scotch-Irish and the Planter aristocracy of the old South marks one of the greatest victories for religious tolerance, and the separation of church and state in America.² Thomas JEFFERSON took a leading part in the movement for religious toleration, and in accomplishing this, broke the power of the Planter aristocracy and made democracy possible. Article sixteen in the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution of 1776 declared that "all men are equally entitled to free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience."³ 4. JEFFERSON won a great victory over intolerance on November 18, 1776, with the passage of a set of resolutions by the Virginia legislature, providing for freedom of thought and the destruction of the Established Church.⁵

Scotch-Irish resistance to the English established church and English economic restrictions failed in Ireland, but prepared them for resistance in America. Their failure to withstand British oppression left the Ulster people the alternative of submission to British law or to leave their homes and seek new ones elsewhere. They chose the latter, and during the first half of the eighteenth century many thousands came to America. The Scotch-Irish like the Germans pre-

ferred Pennsylvania to other colonies. In 1724, James LOGAN, secretary of the Province complained about the Irish squatters; and again in 1729, when more than five thousand came, he wrote: "It looks as if Ireland is to send all of its inhabitants heither.⁶ Large numbers of them settled in the Susquehanna Valley and spread over the Western section of the colony. By 1735, the Scotch-Irish and Germans moved down the Shenandoah Valley; a few settled in what is now West Virginia; and many others drifted on and between 1740 and 1760 made scattered settlements from Virginia to the mountains of Northern Georgia.⁷ It was in one of these settlements in the back country of Virginia that they came in conflict with Angelicanism and the Planter Aristocracy.

In 1738, Colonial Governor GOOCH of Virginia, strongly recommended encouragement of the Scotch-Irish emigrants to his colony, because of their fine qualities as frontiersmen. He wanted a strong frontier, and saw in these tall, hardy, fearless and individualistic people fine material for accomplishing this. The Planter Aristocracy of the tidewater region saw no danger in them because the frontier was so far removed from the planter area. The conservative ruling class of the Old Dominion with its union of church and state failed to recognize the fact that the past experiences of these people had disqualified them to live within the same political bounds with religious and political intolerance. They brought with them to the New World attitudes and beliefs which were reinforced in the Western country of the Colonies. In fact, when they came to Virginia they were American frontiersmen in every respect. In describing them one historian said: "Both the Scotch-Irish and Germans were very susceptible to religious influences. The former were devout followers of John KNOX, brought up in the Old Testament and in the doctrines of government by covenant or compact. They were intensely individualistic and devout to principles of democracy in politics and absolutely for liberty in religion; they were staunch Whigs, detesting both spiritual hierarchy and civil tyranny."⁸

As already noted in this paper, the struggle between these back country folk and the Planter Aristocracy resulted in a victory for freedom. This success lies in part in the decline of prestige of the Established Church, but to a greater degree to their sincere belief in the justice of their cause. Then too, their fight was for the establishment of democratic principles in government. As early as 1755 and 1758, the passage of the Two Penny Acts, caused a conflict between the colonial government and the Established Church which greatly lowered the prestige of the church. The crisis over this question resulted in the Parson's Cause, and fortunately for the Presbyterian group, it came in Hanover County, Virginia which was the center of their power. Furthermore, Patrick HENRY was the speaker for the popular party, and he questioned very boldly the authority of the crown to exercise absolute political control over the Virginia legislature. HENRY was not the devout apostle of religious toleration that JEFFERSON was, but his handling of the Parson's Cause acted unfavorably against the prestige of the Established Church.⁹ This episode, also, made the fight for religious tolerance much easier to win a few years later, 1776-1784.

About the time of the American Revolution, these restless Scotch-Irish dissenters started to move across the mountains into Kentucky and Tennessee. Here they founded no conservative Established Church; they were in the land of the free where self reliance and individual initiative were necessary for self preservation. In this region their democratic principles were developed. While here they no doubt learned of the Illinois Country, a land of promise which had in 1800 a meager 2,458 people, while Kentucky had 220,955. The population in Kentucky increased rapidly between 1800-1810, from 220,955 to 406,511. It

increased less from 1810 to 1820 but still a substantial gain of nearly 16000 people. In 1810 compared to that of Kentucky, Illinois had a small population of 12,288 and was by this time becoming more attractive to the Kentucky pioneer who was beginning to feel crowded and land was getting harder to attain. A few moved across the Ohio into Illinois before the War of 1812, but after that was the movement increased in magnitude. The decade, 1810-1820, gave Illinois a population increase from 12,282 to 55,211. In political advancement the same decade witnessed our change from a territory of the first degree to a full fledged state in the Union.⁹

Early Illinois was from a political standpoint Southern; Governors, Senators and Representatives both state and national were from the south and of the Democratic party. On this point BOGESS says, "In some respects the character of the state government of Illinois shows the character of the settlers. The nativity of Governors and Congressmen of the State shows that the South was the origin of the majority of the population. Before the end of 1830 there had been no northern born representatives of the state in the National House of Representatives; the first Northern born senator was elected in the last month of 1825, and the first Northern Governor in 1830."¹⁰

Democrats, after 1857, were all Republicans until John P. ALTGELD's election in 1896. The Civil War had much to do with the shift from the Democratic ranks, even though Southern Illinois was pro-slavery in sentiment early in the slavery controversy, the Scotch-Irish and German elements were not prone to be thrown on the side of the planter aristocracy to the detriment of the Union and political democracy.

We have been told many times about the predominant influence of New England in the evolution of our democratic institutions. As far as Southern Illinois is concerned her influence was not a determining factor in our political life; her influence was not significant until after 1830. Our first Yankee governor was Augustus C. FRENCH, 1848-1853 who was a Democrat, incidentally the last Democratic governor until 1896. In discussing Yankee influence in early Illinois BOGESS says: "The influx of immigration from New England and the rest of the North did not come until 1830. It was retarded after opening of the Erie Canal (1825) and by the Winnebago and Black Haw Wars, and did not reach its height until the latter was closed and the Indians claims to land in Northern Illinois had been extinguished."¹¹ Even though their numbers were small, the few Yankees among our early pioneers were well received. The "Hated Yankee" was a product of a later period in our history; he was non-existent or a mythical character conjured up by later writers for dramatic effect.

In conclusion I wish to say it has neither been the writers purpose to give an overdrawn estimate of the Scotch-Irish, nor to minimize the contribution of other nationalities to our historical heritage. Any one of several elements in our early settlement might be used as the subject for a highly interesting article; but possibly none of them has contributed more to pioneer history than these hardy Scotch-Irish pioneers. Their influence was strongly felt in every land they occupied from Scotland to the hills of Southern Illinois. Hardships and many struggles for religious and political freedom made of them a people of strong convictions. They intensely hated the British government. Andrew JACKSON was their idol because he too was obsessed with that trait. They had no use for social stratification in any form. Southern planter aristocracy was as distasteful to them as British Royalty. They squatted on government land in Western Pennsylvania, and they squatted on public land in Southern

WRIGHT: The Scotch-Irish Come To Egypt (cont).

Illinois because they could not understand why a Christian should not be allowed to live on unoccupied land which God had created. They hated restraint by government because they had suffered much from it. Oftentimes they sought justice by direct means because they did not trust law courts. A careful analysis of Southern Illinois Society will show that many of these traits of the early Scotch-Irish linger with us still.

- - - - -

1. GREEN, The Foundation of American Nationality, pp. 227-290.
2. GEWEHR, The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1747-1790, pp. 187-219.
3. 4. Ibid pp. 203.
5. Ibid, pp. 205.
6. GREEN, Op. Cite, pp. 291.
7. Ibid, pp. 291.
8. GEWEHR, Op. Cite, pp. 26.
9. Ibid Op., pp. 99.
10. World Almanac, 1937, pp. 242. BOGESS, The Settlement of Illinois, pp. 90ff.
11. Ibid, pp. 145.
12. Ibid, pp. 145ff.

* * * * *